



REMEMBRANCE : A TRIBUTE TO ISWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR FOR HIS ACHIEVEMENTS AND INNOVATIONS IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION DURING THE 19TH CENTURY IN BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The world today we live in is a world of material ease and comfort, of luxury and abundance. And in such a society education plays a vital role in achieving the country's vision of attaining the status of a fully developed nation in terms of economic development, social justice, spiritual, moral and ethical strength towards creating a society that is united democratic, liberal and dynamic. But the scenario was altogether different in the eighteenth century Bengal. Education was then not considered as compulsory and there was no concept of universal education or state-sponsored education. People were then naive and ignorant but this ignorance was not a bliss for them. Being devoid of education they were then controlled and dictated by religious orthodoxy and tyranny, various rituals, customs and degrading superstitions. Casteism, untouchability were very much in practice. And in such an ando-centric society the condition of women was pathetic. It was indeed a beggars description. They were not regarded as human beings. Being born as a girl was regarded a curse. Polygamy, child marriage, kulinism and the abominable rite of sati i.e. the barbaric practice of burning Hindu widows made the life of the women 'hell'. Society was in this time in a state of stupor. It was this time when the waves of Eurocentric enlightenment reached the contours of Indian soil. There were a few men who tried to go beyond the decadent tradition of Bengal. Vidyasagar was one of them. The present study intends to discuss the achievements and innovations of Vidyasagar in the field of education during the 19th century in Bengal.

KEY WORDS: Dissemination of Knowledge, Mass Education, Gender Inequality, Assimilation & Integration.

Indian civilization is one of the ancient civilizations of the world with a hoary past that dates back to 2500 to 3000 B.C. But during the eighteenth century the Indian society especially Bengal was in a dilapidated state. Devoid of education ignorant people were then dictated by religious orthodoxy, various social customs, degrading superstitions. Utter chaos had rendered the society a virtual wasteland. And in such a wasteland Kulinism, child-marriage and abominable rite of *sati* filled the life of *pardah-nashin* women with pervading gloom and darkness. Life was 'hell' to them.

It was this time when the gradual Euro-centric invasion was taking place. It was not merely an economic invasion rather the British conquest of India bore far-reaching ramifications. The two cultures' encounter created a 'contact zone'. It was a state of diffusion and confusion. On one hand the Evangelists were trying to spread education among the masses with their covert intention of religious indoctrination, on the other hand there was hot debate between the Orientalists and the Anglicists regarding the medium of instruction.

Nevertheless the 'contact zone' produced some progressive men of letters who tried to stretch this awakening to the grass root level for socio-cultural transformation and regeneration.

Poly-glot Vidyasagar was one such man who played a very significant role in the intellectual flowering of Bengal. The genius of Vidyasagar lay in the fact that when there was no concept of universal education at that time – he tried to disseminate knowledge among the masses. Not only had this he also sought to integrate and assimilate western culture with the best features of his own country's tradition. He thus formulated, prescribed and executed the re-defining process of socio-cultural awakening in the nineteenth century Bengal.

To translate his ideas into reality he moulded a new system of education in and out of Sanskrit College with a broader aim of superstitious free progressive society. During his tenure as the Principal of Sanskrit College he initiated unprecedented changes in both spheres of – administration and education.

As an administrative reformist he was an iconoclast. He opened the gates of Sanskrit College to all – irrespective of caste, creed or religion. He needed a lot of guts to do that as it was then considered an act of blasphemy. Not only had this he also initiated the acceptance of admission fees and tuition fees. He took drastic measures to ensure punctuality of attendance and discipline from both ends in the classes. He even introduced the weekly holiday from each 1st and 8th days of the moon to Sundays and summer vacation in the sultry months of May and June (Samanta 33).

On the other hand for the students of Sanskrit College earlier who had to spend four to five years upon the Sanskrit grammar *Mughabodh* Vidyasagar introduced outlines of Sanskrit grammar in Bengali and three Sanskrit readers, consisting of easy selections in prose and verse. He also revised the exam pattern by introducing monthly exam instead of holding examinations annually. Not only did he bring about reformation in Sanskrit studies, he also introduced the study of English, western sciences and mathematics.

And now to understand the relevance and significance of the reformation done by Vidyasagar certain things must be highlighted:

- National Curriculum Framework (NCF)³ 2005, Right to Education Act, Directives of Indian Supreme Court – all try to ensure equal opportunity in education irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Vidyasagar had also done the same thing when he opened the gates of Sanskrit College gradually to upper class non-Brahmin students to students of all classes.
- Now-a-days there is the concept of bio-metric attendance. Many state governments have also stipulated fixed hours of presence in the school premises. One must acknowledge that what they are doing now, Vidyasagar had done the same thing when he took drastic measures to ensure punctuality and regularity of attendance for both teachers and students in the Sanskrit College.
- In this post-modern world there are government institutions, private institutions as well as autonomous institutions. However the central point is the appropriate use of money and resources to run those institutions properly. Far-sighted Vidyasagar understood the necessity of economic independence. So he initiated taking admission and tuition fees from the students.
- The NCF-2005 emphasizes on meaningful and joyful learning instead of rote learning. But what they are doing or aiming at Vidyasagar had done it in the long past when he simplified, rationalized the syllabus by eliminating the irrelevant, complex Sanskrit grammar and other texts.
- Vidyasagar's introduction of monthly exam also deserves special mention. Now-a-days there is a lot of talk about Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE)⁴. In this new process through summative and formative evaluation students are evaluated round the year. Vidyasagar was an educationist per excellence in this regard that at that time when there was virtually nothing he thought about holistic learning – focussing on developing all aspects of an individual's personality. So instead of annual examination he initiated monthly exam system to make the students active round the year.

Philanthropist Vidyasagar did not confine himself in the premises of Sanskrit College only. He extended his ambit to penetrate into the heart of Bengal. During the middle of the 1850s when the government appointed him as the Special Inspector of schools he established 20 Model Schools in the four districts – Hoogly, Midnapore, Burdwan and Nadia (Samanta 46).

He not only established the schools, but also supervised them, recruited teachers and even formulated the syllabus. To train the teachers of the Model Schools he set up one Normal School. And on his recommendation the ablest teachers Akshay Kumar Dutta, the Secretary of *Tattabodhini Patrika* and Madhusudan Bachaspati – were appointed as Head Master and Assistant Head Master, respectively on his recommendation. Vidyasagar also requested the authority to create job opportunities for the passed out students of Model schools.

Now once again certain things must be highlighted to understand the ingenuity of Vidyasagar :

- Tol / pathshala-centric education in Bengal at that time was basically confined to writing arithmetic and a bit of revenue and commercial accounting. Quite naturally this system was unable to produce 'modern man'.
- The changes that Vidyasagar initiated involved expansion and modernization of the curriculum. He introduced history, geography, ethics and natural philosophy i.e. elementary science, emphasized on the use of text books, promotion through examinations and in general an integration with the modern concept of western education. In other words he tried to structuralise, universalize and modernize the curriculum. It is interesting to note that after independence the several Educational Commissions set up by the Indian Government emphasized on structuralizing and universalizing education. In many ways Vidyasagar's ideas are echoed by them.
- In the post-independent period Indian Government has also set up National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)⁵ to formally oversee standards, procedures and processes of teacher education system throughout the country. In Vidyasagar's time there was no such concept. But to educate the students of the newly set up Model Schools far-sighted Vidyasagar understood the necessity of training the teachers in a befitting manner. So he set up the Normal School in the premises of Sanskrit College.
- The other notable thing is that Vidyasagar was not in favour of education for education's sake; rather he was utilitarian in this perspective. He linked education with the vocational aspect. That is why he even wrote his higher authority to create job opportunities for the passed out students of Model Schools.
- Again in this world of post-modernism and globalization the concept of trilingualism is quite rampant. But in Vidyasagar's time when there was no concept of universal education – even at that time he introduced the concept of trilingualism. He wanted the use of mother tongue for the beginners, then Sanskrit and English. What is even more interesting that Vidyasagar not only favoured the vernacular Bengali language but also sought to improve it by the means of English and Sanskrit.
- Now-a-days it is mandatory for the colleges to be accredited by The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)⁶. Even the inspection of schools is also quite essential. In Vidyasagar's time Vidyasagar himself supervised those schools and reported the government. He even appointed some inspectors to assist him in this regard.
- It is worth mentioning that now-a-days the teachers of schools and colleges are employed through teacher-recruitment examinations. In his time Vidyasagar also arranged for one teacher recruitment examination in the Sanskrit College (Ghosh 209).

Vidyasagar also channelised and directed his might for the propagation of women education. Under his able management Hindu Balika Vidyalaya, renamed by him as Bethune School evolved as one of the hubs of women education. He wrote articles, pamphlets and even re-read the Sanskrit scriptures to convince the people to send their daughters to school. Later on when the government decided to extend the grants-in-aid to the girls' school too – he within a very short span of time established as many as 40 schools in the interiors of Bengal. Often he had to bear the expenses for providing books, teaching-learning materials, dresses etc. to the students. Now-a-days when the government is trying to decrease the drop-out rates of the students by providing book grants, school dress, mid-day-meal etc. one is reminded of Vidyasagar's ideas in this respect. In many ways they were the brain child of Vidyasagar.

However when the government ceased to provide the grants-in-aid to the newly set up schools, Vidyasagar raised a fund *Nari Siksha Prathistan Vandar* (Samanta 53) for rendering financial assistance to those schools. The tremendous achievement of Vidyasagar lies in the fact that undeterred and undaunted by stiff opposition he continued to lit the flame of women education in Bengal. What is even more astonishing that Vidyasagar had done all these in spite of being one Brahmin!

Once again as the crusader for female education certain things must be singled out :

- Now-a-days there is a lot of discussion on women liberation, women empowerment, gender discrimination etc. But one cannot even imagine the pathetic life of women during the eighteenth century. They were then not treated as human beings. Vidyasagar realized that unless the womenfolk of this land are rescued from this quagmire there is no respite from this wasteland. So he, amid much hostility and opposition, started female education. Not only had this he also re-read the scriptures to justify his stance by quoting from them.
- At present there are several schemes initiated by the Central Government and the State Governments for the girl child- like – *Kanyashree*⁷, *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*⁸ etc. In Vidyasagar's time he also established one *Nari Siksha Prathistan Vandar* to render financial assistance to the girl students.

- It is also worth-mentioning here that in his later period of life Vidyasagar fought against kulinism, child marriage and polygamy because these things were integrally related with women emancipation and their education. Truly Vidyasagar's effort in this regard was stupendous.

In the later period of his life, after resigning from the Sanskrit College he associated himself with Metropolitan School and College. The genesis of the Institution was a stupendous event in the National history of India as it was run by the natives, virtually with no help from the ruling British. To the indigenous people the Institution symbolized defiance and self-assertion – the proud display of nationalism and vaulting ambition.

In this age of globalization when there is the mushrooming of private institutions one may miss the subtle nuances to understand its significance and the role it played then. But it must be acknowledged that the Institution was the first Institution of national education that started to decolonize the mind of the indigenous people.

Multi-dimensional Vidyasagar apart from being one educational reformer was also a prolific writer. He used his mighty pen to write, translate, edit and publish primers, readers, and text books for the students. He simplified and rationalized the Sanskrit grammar to make learning effective, joyful and meaningful. Mention must be made of the Bengali primer *Varna-parichay* – a timeless wonder. The book foreshadowed the application of psychology into education. The other books *Kathamala*, *Bodhodaya*, *Akhyamanjari* trilogy, *Jiban-charit* etc. also upheld profound moral. They imbibed in them what we call at present value education.

Besides being a prolific writer Vidyasagar was also an 'Improving Vernacularist' (Hatcher 86). In the true sense of the term he was the architect of Modern Bengali prose. He improved and modernized the Bengali prose to disseminate western learning to the grass root level. It is he who systematized, rationalized and simplified the Bengali prose by freeing it from pedanticism and pedestrianism. He added rhythm and beauty to it thus making the soil fertile for Rabindranath Tagore to evolve.

Thus iconoclast Vidyasagar re-defined the fate of Bengal by initiating a paradigm shift a structural change in the field of education. Modern Bengal as well as India is really indebted to this mighty man who left an indelible impression by revolutionizing the entire field of education. He seems to be non-pareil in this regard. Though he has not philosophised his educational thoughts in a codified manner like other educational thinkers have done but his books, readers, letters and the notes clearly show his views and philosophies of education.

As per as his concept and aim of education is concerned he was an eclectic⁹ – a symbiosist who tried to synthesize and amalgamate the different philosophies of education. He aimed at nurturing the child into a full grown individual having humanitarian outlook who would be progressive, liberal, rational and nationalistic in spirit. In the grand scheme he assigned the teachers with greater roles. They were no mere facilitators of reading and reciting rather they were entrusted to develop in students deeper insight of events and situations so that in near future the students would become ideal citizens of the nation who would contribute meaningfully for the cause of the society.

The glorious achievement of Vidyasagar lies in the fact that when there was virtually nothing he like a true visionary wrought out one educational system – designed it, executed them and integrated it with our life to bring about socio-cultural transformation. He directed all his might and effort to structuralise the educational system to reach to the margin i.e. the sub-alterns to empower and enable them to contribute to the centre. Truly to him education was the tenor – the vehicle of resurrection – the panacea to ameliorate the ills of society and to us – the beneficiaries – he is the modern Prometheus.

NOTES

1. *The Pardah Nashin* is a poem by Sarojini Naidu where she paints the tragic life of the Muslim women.
2. This is Mary Louise Pratt's concept. She introduced this concept in a 1991 Keynote address to the Modern Language Association titled *Arts of the Contact Zone*.
3. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) is one of four National Curriculum Frameworks published in 1975, 1988, 2000 and 2005 by the National Council of Educational Research and Training NCERT in India. The Framework provides the framework for making syllabi, textbooks and teaching practices within the school education programmes in India.
4. Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) is a process of assessment, mandated by the Right to Education Act, of India. As a part of this system, student's marks will be replaced by grades which will be evaluated through a series of curricular and extra-curricular evaluations along with academics.
5. National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) is an Indian Government

body set up under the National Council for Teacher Education Act, 1993. It was set up in 1995. This council function for the central as well as state governments on all matter with regards to the Teacher Education and its Secretariat is located in the Department of Teacher Education and National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

6. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an organisation that assess and accredits institutions of higher education in India. It is an autonomous body funded by University Grants Commission (UGC).
7. Kanyashree Prakalpa is one of its kind initiatives taken by the Government of West Bengal to improve the life and the status of the girls by helping economically backward families with cash.
8. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save girl child, educate girl child) is a Government of India scheme that aims to generate awareness and improve the efficiency of welfare services meant for women.
9. Eclecticism adheres to or is constituted from several theories, styles, and ideas in order to gain a through insight about the subject and draws upon different theories in different cases.

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